



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Student (Dis) Engagement in Learning amid the Economic Crisis: Challenges and Coping Strategies

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**ABSTRACT**

Learning in a turbulent economic environment often presents both students and teachers with numerous problems that affect their involvement and performance in educational activities. Notwithstanding extensive research on the teachers' coping strategies amid the economic crisis, very few empirical studies have explored how students in similar contexts navigated the challenges presented by these turbulences characterized by hyper-inflation, currency fluctuations and scarcity of resources. Framed from the resilience theory, this qualitative study employed the case of Zimbabwe and deployed semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) to investigate the effects of Zimbabwe's economic crisis on student (dis)engagement. The study analyzed the challenges experienced by students and explored the coping strategies adopted to sustain educational success. Data generated from 10 students, drawn from rural and urban settings, were thematically analyzed, and showed evidence of a decline in student learning during normal hours and limited access to resources, hindering their learning. Faced with such challenges, students turned to internet sources, peer support, and unsanctioned shadow education, which however depleted the little income their parents had saved. The findings underscore the urgency to address the problems encountered by students by investing in education infrastructure as well as resources; and offering stimulus packages for teachers to support continuity of learning in times of crisis. Syphoning from the students' voices, the study presents fresh perspectives on student engagement that see students as involved, critical, and agentic participants in all facets of school life amid adversity.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Students, as key stakeholders in the education sector, though not often consulted in educational decisions, face immense challenges affecting their engagement, motivation, and performance amidst the economic turbulence (Kgari-Masondo and Chingwanangwana, 2024; Moyo et al., 2023). A corpus of studies has been conducted that explored the interplay between the influence of the economic crisis on education and the teacher (dis)engagement. For example, the resilience of Greek primary school teachers throughout the economic crisis was examined by Botou et al. (2017), who concluded that the crisis had a detrimental effect on the quality of education as well as social and economic issues. Furthermore, research conducted in southwest Nigeria by Bamigboye et al. (2016) revealed that both teachers and students suffered because of the impact of the economic on education. Maalouf and Baradhi (2024) carried up another study in Lebanon to investigate how the country's economic crisis affected teacher motivation, school quality, and student enrolment. The study showed that the economic crisis negatively impacted the education sector. However, these studies overlooked the coping strategies employed by students to navigate the economic collapse in the studied countries.

Studies done in Zimbabwe share similar findings. For example, Katsinde (2022) analysed the impact of economic turbulence on Zimbabwean teachers between 2000 and 2017 and concluded that the

economic crisis influenced teachers to engage in other activities for them to survive the economic situation, which however, changed the way in which they taught. In another study, Moyo et al (2023) investigated the challenges teachers faced and the survival techniques they used to improve their living conditions. That study, while useful in assisting to discern the terrain created by the economic crisis, overlooks the coping strategies students were employing to mitigate the learning challenges. A noteworthy and recent study by Kgari-Masondo and Chingwanangwana (2024) examined the experiences of school principals and teachers in elementary and secondary schools regarding ethical conduct in the context of Zimbabwe's economic turmoil. The findings of that study showed teachers were engaging in unethical actions in schools, which they attributed to contemporary turbulences affecting their profession. Similarly, Bakasa and Mokomane (2024) investigated the difficulties teachers in Zimbabwe faced in making a living and their coping mechanisms amid the nation's economic fall from 2008 to 2015, highlighting some of the terrible conditions of work that teachers faced in such resource-constrained settings. While these studies demonstrated that Zimbabwe has experienced significant setbacks in the education sector and have proffered fundamental insights into our understanding of teacher engagement and motivation during the economic crisis, little is known on students' experiences, leaving a scholarly gap on how students navigated the challenges due to economic turbulence. Against this backdrop, this study underpinned by the following questions intends to plug the critical lacuna:

1. How does the economic crisis affect student disengagement in educational activities?
2. What coping strategies do students employ to maintain educational success?

By examining the complex relationships between the economic crisis and the student (dis)engagement, the research assists in the design of evidence-based policies and strategies to support the education sectors in similar contexts other than Zimbabwe. Understanding how the fiscal crisis affects student (dis)engagement can provide insights into coping strategies that students can adopt to sustain educational success in challenging environments, extending the conversation on the effects of fiscal turbulence on education from the perspectives of students whose voice has been neglected in the space of economics of education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Student engagement

Studies in the education sector has linked learning, retention, and academic achievement to student engagement in the learning and teaching environments (Chipchase et al., 2017). Despite the abundance of literature, there is no consensus on what constitutes student engagement because of diverse interpretations (Balwant, 2018; Bergdahl, 2022; Burns et al., 2021). According to Bergdahl (2022), attendance, grades, overall wellbeing, and academic performance are all strongly correlated with student engagement. Contrarily, Balwant (2018) defines it as the concurrent defence and withdrawal of an individual's preferred self in actions that support disconnection, absence on all levels - cognitive, emotional, and physical - and passive, insufficient role performances. However, one definition of student engagement widely cited is 'the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities' (Chipchase et al (2017: 32). Given the ambiguity surrounding the definition of student engagement, this study employs Balwant (2018)'s conceptualisation, which states that, in the context of learning, student engagement refers to students being involved to improve their learning outcomes, and that disengagement, on the other hand, is the opposite of student engagement and is characterised by passivity, absenteeism, school dropout, and social problems. In this context, students' active participation in class activities is the simplest definition of student engagement (Bergmark and Westman, 2018). Green (2018: 3) contends that students' vigour, devotion, and immersion in their studies as well as a sense of community within their learning communities are usually what defines it. Investigations on student engagement in the learning is often useful to guide school policy and practice. According to Bergdahl (2017), it assesses and tracks the effectiveness of educational interventions as well as the quality of instruction. Because of this, a student's level of engagement or disengagement during the secondary school years has a substantial influence on their academic performance. When teachers are not involved, student involvement suffers and vice versa. This indicates that student participation is influenced by the context in which

teacher teaching and learning activities take place, and that context has an impact on both engagement and disengagement.

### **The economic crisis in Zimbabwe and teachers' coping strategies**

Zimbabwe's economic crisis, spanning over two decades, has had far-reaching consequences on various sectors, including education. The crisis, characterized by hyperinflation, currency fluctuations, scarcity of resources, and political instability, has severely impacted the teaching and learning process (Hove and Ndawana, 2019; Ngwenya, 2021). In this study the term economic crisis in Zimbabwe is going to be used to denote a situation in which the nation's economy is marked by a continual and substantial decrease of economic activities (Botou et al., 2017) wherein the economy is characterised by sudden, catastrophic shifts in a nation's production variables, as well as the costs of products and services (Moyo et al., 2023). Several studies have advanced diverse versions of the built up to the economic crisis in Zimbabwe, though they agree that the country was under strain due to bad governance and poor fiscal policies. For example, Pufall et al. (2016) contends that the World Bank- and IMF-sponsored Economic Structural Adjustment Programme's introduction marked the beginning of the economic downfall in Zimbabwe from the 1990s. However, it is believed that the programme to distribute land redistribution from 2000 was the primary cause of the economic catastrophe which characterised a substantial portion of the 2000s up until the time this report was written. In agreement, Kgari-Masondo and Chingwanangwana (2024) opine that the hurriedly done programme for distributing the land enacted in February 2000, in which 4,000 white farmers were forced to leave their land to redistribute it to the Black population, is to blame for the sociopolitical and economic unrest. That programme caused a severe economic meltdown and social chaos. Moyo et al. (2023) however, linked Zimbabwe's economic collapse to unbudgeted gratuities and monthly pensions given to war veterans in 1997, which resulted in the collapse of the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange and put pressure on the nation's financial system. Similarly, and by extension, Katsinde (2022) contends that the droughts, the land reform program, the participation of Zimbabwe in the civil unrest in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the not budgeted gratuity for war veterans triggered the economic disaster. The application of economic restrictions by Western countries for human rights violations, as well as the stoppage of financial support by the international banks for failing to repay loans, exacerbated an already volatile situation (Katsinde, 2022). Taken together the nation's rough political environment and poor fiscal policies are major contributors to the country's economic problems (Bushu and Kufakurinani, 2024). As a result, Zimbabwe had severe economic difficulties starting in 2008 and continuing until later. The nation saw world-record inflation rates between 2008 and 2024, at which point it abandoned its currency. Since then, the economy has not recovered, enduring prolonged difficulties with liquidity, inflationary pressures, and low productivity in the manufacturing and agricultural sectors (Bushu and Kufakurinani, 2024; Kgari-Masondo and Chingwanangwana, 2024). That suggests that the country was and is still bleeding financially and recovery is nowhere in sight unless corrective measures are instituted by shunning the causes of the economic meltdown.

### **Coping strategies for teachers**

Amid the economic tumble, many sectors experience the brunt of the bad economy, and the education sector is no exception. The effects of the economic crisis on education and teacher motivation have been extensively studied. Economic crises can erode teacher morale and performance, leading to reduced teacher motivation and job satisfaction (Bamigboye et al., 2016; Ngwenya, 2021; Maalouf and Baradhi, 2024; Moyo et al., 2023), increased teacher absenteeism and turnover (Katsinde, 2022; Kgari-Masondo and Chingwanangwana, 2024) and decreased student achievement and learning outcomes (Heyneman, 1990; Bakasa and Mokomane, 2024; Hove & Ndawana, 2019). According to Kgari-Masondo and Chingwanangwana (2024) the main factors alleged to be distressing teachers are overdue payment of remuneration packages. Faced with such challenges, often, teachers devise coping strategies to survive during economic challenges. As confirmed by Moyo et al. (2023) that rather than leaving the teaching profession, teacher employed survival strategies such as engaging in informal activities such as cross-border trading, which Bakasa and Mokomane (2024: 397) support when they argue 'that instead of being hedgehogs that rely on one type of resource and focus on their teaching, teachers in resource-constrained contexts tend to become foxes that engage in a portfolio of activities to survive.' Besides being foxes, research has shown that the collapse of the

economy compelled the teachers to migrate to neighbouring countries, with the aim to make a living (Bakasa and Mokomane, 2024; Katsinde, 2022). However, teachers who did not migrate utilised the opportunity in schools and started to 'offer extra lessons which were lessons that were offered after school hours for a fee' (Kgari-Masondo and Chingwanangwana, 2024: 3). The coping strategies demonstrated by teachers suggest that the education sector in Zimbabwe has experienced significant setbacks, including teacher absenteeism, brain drain and the introduction of shadow education, a phenomenon that is encroaching the education sector in Zimbabwe (Author, 2024). These challenges have compromised the quality of education, undermining the country's human capital development and socio-economic growth.

We argue that teachers are critical agents in students' academic development, but when they are faced with economic problems their abilities are challenged. While the above studies have contributed to our discernment to the plight of teachers and their coping mechanisms amid the economic collapse in Zimbabwe, little is known about how students survived the economic turbulence and how they adapted to ensure continuity of their studies. There is a dearth of literature on their perspectives and their voices are inaudible in research. This study explores this uncharted terrain by exploring the challenges the students faced and their coping strategies thereof, with the aim to provide evidence-based intervention strategies.

### **Theoretical framework**

The resilience theory pioneered by Norman Garmezy, Michael Rutter, Emmy Werner, and Ruth Smith in the 1970s (Moyo et al, 2023; van Breda, 2018) framed our understanding in this study. At the core of the theory is the assumption that resilience pertains to the capacity to manage stress or, more accurately, to revert to a state of normalcy following a stressful episode. As argued by Laboy and Fannon (2016: 39) resilience has been used as a frame to 'evaluate the ability or capacity of a person, object, entity, or system to persist in the face of disruptions or difficulty.' Its use has been reported in diverse disciplines to include social work, psychology, development studies and ecology to explain the many risks and vulnerability management techniques as well as the ability to handle shocks, ambiguity, and change by reorganising, adapting, and renewing (Moyo et al., 2023). The theory values susceptibilities and capacities for adaptation of people and groups impacted by a disruption. As van Breda (2018: 4) defines resilience as a 'multilevel processes that systems engage in to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity.' Contextually, the way students demonstrated their ability to absorb, resist, and adapt to educational shocks while preserving the continuity of their studies is resilience. The economic crisis in Zimbabwe represents adversity, resulting in ominous experiences such as students' failure to attend lessons, to get teachers who could assist them and to afford educational resources. Then the students' engagement in private lessons and seeking assistance from peers during a national economic turmoil demonstrates resilience, which become their response to inevitable but perhaps unknown disruptions in the education sector. The theory is useful in our understanding of the nature of (dis)engagements that students adapted and adopted to transcend the terrain of challenges that emanated from the economic decline in Zimbabwe and how that can provide new avenues for policy makers to craft intervention strategies when faced with such adversities in the future.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research approach**

The study explored the problems that students encountered amid the economic crisis in Zimbabwe and their coping strategies thereof. Using a qualitative approach, the study allowed us to continuously elucidate the nature of the challenges, and the strategies adopted as it was "experienced, structured and interpreted" by the students during their daily learning (Cromptley, 2015: 13). Being qualitative, the study fitted in well with the interpretivism-derived philosophical presumptions that seeks to comprehend individuals in their natural contexts. (Yin, 2022).

### **Research design and sampling techniques**

In line with the interpretative techniques, a descriptive and interpretive case study was adopted as the research design (Ledford and Gast, 2018). We took inspiration from Yin (2022), who believes that a case study's main distinguishing characteristics are its diversity of viewpoints, each of which is

anchored in a particular context. With the help of the school heads, 10 students of mixed gender from the five participating schools were purposefully chosen. To allow for different voices, the study used students from microcosm representations of five secondary schools in Zimbabwe, which are scattered in rural and urban areas of Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe. Although it was promising to identify and assess the entire relevant population, time and financial constraints made the effort expensive. It was also reasonable to choose five schools and two participants from each school for 'feasibility reasons' (O'Leary 2014: 30). Senior status and familiarity with the study's objectives were the deciding factors in the selection of two students per school. That allowed us to gather information from informed students instead of selecting lower secondary pupils who were unfamiliar with the topic of inquiry. Since we believed that choosing only one student per school could negate the goal of data triangulation, we chose two individuals from every school that was sampled. Over-dependence on a single student per school for data generation was avoided since it would have clouded the researchers' perception of the reality under investigation.

### **Data generation and analysis**

Focus group discussions (FGD) and semi-structured interviews were employed in the study to gather data. The challenges encountered and mitigation strategies deployed by 10 students throughout the financial volatility were documented through semi-structured interviews with each of them and two focus groups consisting of five students each. We used Miles and Huberman's (1994) fundamental coding procedures in our data analysis. Coding is the process of summing, line by line, the information contained in brief text passages. The pith of this research was on the interpretations that students made of the stories and the explanations for why things were 'the way they were' (Maree, 2012: 103). The generated data were examined in tandem with the focus of the study in conjunction with the themes that surfaced from the investigation. As a result, the information was recorded on audio, listened to, transcribed, scrutinised, coded, compressed, presented, and examined while it was still 'very fresh in our minds' (Punch, 2011: 199). Member checking improved the validity of the data by returning themes to the students, who then confirmed if the 'data matched or not to their lived experiences' of how they navigated the economic turbulence (Yin, 2022: 123).

### **Ethics issues**

To carry out the study at sampled schools, permission was initially requested and granted by the District School Inspectors, Principals, Provincial Education Director, and the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education who is the gatekeeper. Consent forms were signed by students following the advice from Yin (2022). Consent was first sought to record interviews and focus group sessions on the tape recorder and later the use of the students verbatim in publications. Fictitious names (Student A, B, C.... to J) were used to hide identity.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Student disengagement in educational activities**

Drawing from the voices of students in both semi-interviews and focus group discussions, it was evident that students were disengaged in educational activities because of teacher absenteeism and their negligence of duty. In an interview, Student F complained that:

Teachers do not teach us as they used to do before the economic collapse.... They come to school to sell snacks and sweets to us during school hours. We are left on our own, leaving bullies at our exposure, tormenting us.

In addition to Student F's sentiment was student H who claimed that:

Most teachers absent themselves regularly. It is rare to see a teacher at school more than three times a week. Their commitment to duty leaves a lot to be desired. We are on our own in most cases, but this creates chaos because not all of us take education seriously. Some of us take drugs and even vandalise school property in the absence of the teachers who used to enforce discipline.

The finding is consistent with Pino-James et al (2019: 103) who argue that the main tenets of teaching environments that support student engagement must include 'meaningful classwork, the

development of student competence, the support of student agency, the promotion of positive peer relationships, and the establishment of positive teacher–student relationships,' which were missing in Zimbabwean schools. An analysis of the students' voice shows that students were no longer engaged in their educational studies as teachers were engaged in the informal trading and hassled to make a living for their families. The sentiments by students resonate with Kgari-Masondo and Chingwanangwana (2024) who contend that unprofessionalism was the order of the day in the schools due to economic turbulence, where teachers did not attend to the learners during normal working hours in the schools. At worst, Ngwenya (2021) and Katsinde (2022) report that there was absence of teachers in schools resulting in the collapse of secondary school discipline in Zimbabwe, including drug abuse, vandalism, and lesson skipping because of financial hardships, as teachers lost interest in enforcing discipline among their students. Taken together, the finding suggests that the economic challenges affected teachers' attendance at school or promoted unethical practices by teachers where they engage in formal trading, leading to student disengagement in educational activities. Worryingly, we argue that teachers had no right to absent themselves unofficially since they have access to an array of absence of leave which they could have taken and allow their replacement to be made to ensure continuity in the teaching process. However, while the teachers' reactions to the economic collapse helped us to understand the nature of their resilience amid the economic turbulence, the impact of the economic crisis on student engagement and how they manage the economic crisis on their studies was overlooked, leaving a critical gap for policy maker on how to assist students to manage their education amid the crisis. The next section answers this critical concern.

## Students' coping strategies

### Emergence of private extra lessons

Both semi-structured interviews and FGD revealed that while teachers did not instruct students during normal working hours, but later went on to provide private lessons at their homes at a fee (Kgari-Masondo and Chingwanangwana, 2024), in what had come to be called shadow education (Author, 2024). In response, students engaged in private extra lessons. The students paid for extra lessons willingly after a realisation that their chance of performing well in the forthcoming examinations was hinged on undertaking these private lessons though at a cost. Student A in an FGD narrated that:

*Some of our teachers are no longer available. Those around are providing private lessons at a fee. We have no option because at the end of the year, examinations are to be administered regardless of whether we have covered the syllabus. As such, these private lessons are meant to help us cover the units that teachers at school have not taught. Regrettably this is at a cost.*

In support, student J remarked:

*We pay extra fees other than that stipulated by the school for the private lessons because we want to do well in the end of year examinations. These lessons compensate the learning time we have lost when we are at schools because teachers are not teaching us as they used to do because of the meagre salaries they get due to economic challenges the country is facing.*

The finding confirms Bakasa and Mokomane (2024) who argue that the teachers who chose to stay in the field seized the chance that was created by the economic woes and started to offer private lessons. That became a lucrative business for them though at the expense of the vulnerable students who had no option but to comply with the situation to ensure their educational success. That affirms the resilience theory which argues that when faced with adversity the person must think creatively to bounce back from disturbances and return to a pre-existing state or equilibrium (van Breda, 2018). That resilience involves an ongoing adjustment and initiative-taking foresight of evolving conditions. Seen this way, when teachers begun to moonlight by commercialising education through engaging learners for private gains in addition their normal salaries or allowances (Ngwenya, 2021), students adapted by attending the private lessons to ensure educational success was achievable at the end of the year. While attending the private lessons was a noble intention, it however depleted the little income that the families had saved for survival because their parents too were not spared from the brunt as they were also victims of the same economic turbulence.

### Teacher absenteeism and the support from peers

It was a finding of this study that students sought support from peers after observing that their teachers were no longer in schools but had migrated to neighbouring countries to search for paying jobs as a coping strategy for survival of them and their families. In an FGD, Student C from a rural secondary school explained that:

*After noticing that our Maths teacher was not coming for lessons for a long time, we asked for his whereabouts. We were shocked to learn that he had crossed the border to South Africa. I then decided to get assistance from my friend who was doing Maths at the same school but was two years my senior. It was him who taught me the subject to prepare for my end of year Maths examinations.*

Student F, from a farm secondary school confirmed that:

*A friend of mine who was good at Maths helped me to prepare for the examinations. I was lucky to have him as he lived within my neighbourhood. I arranged with her to teach me Maths twice a week. That assisted me in my preparations for the examinations.*

The finding suggests that students engaged their peers because they understood that their academic success is significantly impacted by how engaged or disengaged, they are during secondary school years which Burns et al (2021) also support. The sentiments expressed by both students show that teachers were not found in schools because of the collapse of the economy which had rendered their salaries useless and that had forced them to migrate to foreign lands. The migration of teachers to neighbouring countries has been reported elsewhere in studies. As reported by Katsinde (2022) and Kgari-Masondo and Chingwanangwana (2024) that a new migratory order for teachers was created because of Zimbabwe's economic crisis starting in 2000 to assure their fundamental existence. That was not unique because migration is reported as a key coping mechanism when individuals find themselves in precarious situations (Bakasa and Mokomane, 2024). What the teachers did was a demonstration of their resilience through finding other means of survival besides their normal teaching in schools. However, that migration of teachers to outside countries disengaged students from their education process as narrated by the students in the FGD, leaving them vulnerable as they could not access education and subsequently denying them the right to education. To rebound from that adversity, students then sought support from peers to continue with their education. The finding shows resilience demonstrated by students to absorb the disturbance brought by the economic crisis. Peers were helping each other to ensure continuity of educational activities. That aligns with the resilience theory which argues that when faced with adversity, people adapt their ways of doing things to revert to a state of normalcy during a stressful time (Laboy and Fannon, 2016). When teachers left for the diaspora which threatened the engagement in educational activities, students demonstrated the capacity to rebound from adversity (Masten, 2015) that manifested in the form of teachers' absenteeism brought by the economic turbulence. Thus, students became more resourceful by seeking support from their peers.

### Replacement of the classroom teacher with the use of the internet

A striking finding that emerged from semi-structured interviews and FGD was the replacement of the traditional teacher with the internet. Students from affluent families reported that much of their learning was now done online after observing a lack of commitment to teaching by teachers. In an interview, Student E from an urban school noted that:

*Rather than teaching us, the teachers engage in the informal buying and selling of goods during weekdays. This is their business these days.... trying to make a living under these harsh economic conditions. I can not to ask them to teach me. I am now using the Wi-fi at home to learn online most of the time. I will continue to bother my parents with the internet data if I want to pass.*

In confirmation, Student D had this to say:

*Teachers are busy with their buying and selling activities and not with us. Sometimes, half of our teachers are doing non-school business. Only a few are teaching us. We had to rely on the internet for online notes.*

These responses reflect the teachers' agency and resilience in the face of the tumbling economy in Zimbabwe. The finding confirms 'the analogy of hedgehogs and foxes,' as explained by Bakasa and Mokomane (2024: 397) rather than being 'hedgehogs that rely on one type of resource - a single job and salary and focus on their teaching - teachers in resource-constrained contexts tend to become foxes that engage in a portfolio of activities to survive.' However, the students showed their own resilience against the economic crisis and the reactions of the teachers. Rather than waiting for the economy to recover for teachers to come back to deliver lessons, the student engaged on online lessons to continue with their studies. This form of resilience using online learning is not new in the world. From 2019, soon after the outbreak of COVID-19, educational institutions were shut down and virtual learning was introduced to ensure continuity of education (Author, 2023a). However, worrisomely is that the online learning in which students engaged the internet as alternative teachers, have challenges related to the cost of data and internet connectivity. Additionally, the online learning cannot be done by all students in the whole of Zimbabwe because in an earlier study, Author (2023b) in his claim reported that schools and families in the country were different in their ability to afford internet services, and hence cannot shield, their students or children from exclusion due to digital divide.

Taken together, the study has illustrated four elements related to the student engagement and their coping strategies which evolve around: academic challenge they faced, peer-to-peer learning they sought, teacher-student interactions which disengaged them, and school atmosphere which turned into mini shops and centre for vandalism. A wide range of students' own activities, their perceptions of coursework, their perceptions of the acts of their teachers, and their impressions of the institutional environment were used to build their coping strategies. As a result, the study presents fresh perspectives on student engagement that see students as involved, critical, and agentic participants in all facets of school life amid adversity.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study sets out to explore the effects of Zimbabwe's monetary crisis on student (dis)engagement, investigating the problems encountered by students and identifying coping mechanisms used to maintain educational success. In exploring students' level of (dis)engagement amid the economic crisis in Zimbabwe, the study presents a student perspective on the economics of education. The study demonstrated passively some coping strategies that teachers adopted to survive in the face of the economic turmoil. While teachers employed their strategies whose foci was to make life possible for their families, students did not fold up their hands waiting for salvation from some unknown quarters. Rather they engaged in educational activities using diverse strategies. Notably, attending private lessons proved to be a worthwhile undertaking, though that put a strain on the family's finance. That again raises a critical concern. While the parents of these students were also struggling to make a living amid the crisis, they were expected to pay the unsanctioned private lessons in addition to what they had paid to the schools, giving parents unwarranted burden created by unprofessional and unethical teachers. Though demanding strong financial support, students used the internet as resources for their education. While using the internet to learn online was not unique, the coping strategy was plausible, demonstrating the students' resilience. It was also a remarkable coping strategy to use peers who were knowledgeable in diverse subjects as resource teachers and as pillars to lean on during the trying times. We conclude that despite facing trenchant challenges driven by the economic woes in their education endeavours, students' engagement in this study have demonstrated that their thinking aligns with the resilience theory. The study found instances in which teachers' actions affected students' transition from disengagement to engagement and vice versa.

Based on the nature of resilience demonstrated, the study recommends that the government set up digital structures across the country to enable nonstop learning in the event of such challenges. While we believe that human teachers cannot be completely replaced by the internet, its use proved significant during the economic collapse and is likely to be of use in future crisis. It also became evident that teachers were forced to abandon students searching other pathways to survive, an inevitable undertaking given the circumstances they faced due to the economic meltdown. While it is a mammoth task to undertake, the government is implored to provide cushioning allowances amid economic crisis that may deter the teachers from engaging in unethical doings, with the aim to



discourage them from practising unprofessionalism which leads to a disrepute of the profession. The issue of making parents pay private lessons after paying stipulated fees by the school is a concern that must be nipped in the bud before blossoming to uncontrolled levels, which can be enacted using regulatory policies that must be applied unselectively across the education system. While the study was significant in unpacking the coping strategies the students employed to transcend the education trajectory amid the economic turbulences, it is limited in terms of its sample size which does not permit generalisation of the findings. Hence, the findings must be read and interpreted with caution, though they provide fundamental insights that other studies can use to anchor further investigations.

### Author contributions

**BBM** conceived the idea, designed the project and wrote the manuscript. **PC** participated in the design of the study and helped in writing the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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